

# AIDS: Grim Prospects

A National Academy of Sciences report predicts 'catastrophe' if the disease is not checked

These are the portents of catastrophe:

■ As of November 1986, 15,000 Americans had died of AIDS or AIDS-related diseases, 27,000 had been diagnosed as suffering from AIDS and 1.5 million Americans were estimated to be carrying the AIDS virus—in most cases, without knowing it.

■ By 1991, 270,000 Americans will have been diagnosed as having AIDS, the death toll will have risen to 54,000 a year and the virus, in all probability, will have spread to between 5 million and 10 million persons. How many of those 5 million to 10 million Americans will eventually die of AIDS? Perhaps half—but no one really knows.

Dr. David Baltimore, a Nobel Prize-winning biochemist at MIT, put it bluntly. "AIDS is a problem for everyone—gay and straight, urban and rural. We are at a critical point in the progress of the epidemic [and] we are quite honestly frightened by the future prospects." Baltimore

**Call for action: San Francisco protest**

**How many will die? Activists in an AIDS-support**

was cochairman of a special assessment team drawn from the Institute of Medicine and the National Academy of Sciences—the most prestigious body of scientists in the nation, and a group not inclined to hysteria. Their conclusion, issued in a 374-page report last week, was simple: the spread of AIDS portends nothing less than a medical and social catastrophe for the United States, and a sharply increased program of research and public education is urgently needed to control the disease. Still, members of the panel were careful to find some cause for optimism against the ominous thrust of their findings. AIDS *can* be prevented from exploding within the heterosexual majority, they said, if the nation acts decisively and soon: meanwhile, there is little risk of infection from casual contact with AIDS victims, and no reason for panic, persecution or draconian legal measures against the homosexual men and intravenous drug users who still make up the "high risk" groups.

**The choice:** What was not said—or what was said very softly indeed—was that the nation no longer can avert catastrophe completely: in plain language, the choice now is between a lesser catastrophe and a very much larger one. In the view of many gays, the number of deaths among homosexual men is already of catastrophic proportions. The five-year projections used by the IOM/NAS panel, moreover, are based on conservative estimates of the already existing extent of the AIDS virus and are therefore all but certain to lead to a cumulative total of 179,000 deaths by 1991. That is a higher death toll, as NAS president

**'We are honestly frightened':** Baltimore, right, with IOM/NAS-panel colleagues

should rise to \$1 billion a year by 1991, the report argued, and the federal government should increase its budget for research and public-health measures to \$1 billion a year as well. The panel praised much of the government's efforts so far: spending on AIDS research and surveillance has soared from \$5.5 million in 1982 to an estimated \$411 million in 1987. But the panel called public-education efforts "woefully inadequate." They warned of "a lack of cohesiveness and strategic planning throughout the national effort" to combat AIDS and urged the creation of a national commission to direct a war on AIDS in the future. The report also praised U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop's recent call for much wider sex education for school-children as a "step in the right direction."

**The federal response:** Speaking for the Reagan administration, Dr. Robert Windom of the Department of Health and Human Services said HHS is "in the process of putting together a strong program for health education, risk reduction and information dissemination" on AIDS. The 1987 budget for those programs, Windom said, is \$82 million, though HHS is also seeking support from the American Medical Association and other private groups.

Beyond all that, the study urged Ronald Reagan to make controlling AIDS "a major national goal." But the White House last week reserved comment on the panel's conclusions, and the president's aides seemed to doubt that Reagan would give AIDS the same kind of personal attention he has given to drug abuse. "Frankly, I don't have a clue what we're going to do, if anything," said one—and another, asked whether there would be direct involvement by Reagan himself, said, "I don't see that." Reagan, who has made very few public comments on the AIDS crisis, seems somehow squeamish on the issue.

He may yet be forced into it. Even at its present level the AIDS epidemic threatens to swamp the nation's health-care system with immense costs and an almost unimaginable caseload of slowly dying patients. AIDS poses profound ethical and legal questions for employers, insurance companies and public officials, and it has become an issue in electoral politics as well. This week, for example, California voters will decide on Proposition 64, a cunningly crafted referendum item that could force state officials to isolate and quarantine AIDS victims. Sponsored by the disciples of political extremist Lyndon LaRouche, Proposition 64 seems destined for defeat. But it may still be a harbinger of a national debate on AIDS—a debate that could require Reagan, that most cheerful of Middle Americans, to commit his office to controlling this ghastly epidemic.

TOM MORGANTHAU with MARY HAGER  
in Washington

## group marching in New York City's Gay Rights Day parade

by the use of a condom. The AIDS virus is present in blood, semen and saliva: it is transmissible during the sex act from man to woman and from woman to man. Research suggests the AIDS virus has so far made small inroads among the heterosexual population; of currently diagnosed AIDS cases in the United States, only 4 percent are thought to have been transmitted heterosexually. "That provides a window of opportunity—but the window will close very quickly if we don't act," said Dr. Stanley Weiss of the National Cancer Institute. "What happens in the next five years will depend on our success in changing people's attitudes and behaviors. If we don't succeed, the virus will continue to spread."

**Coercive measures:** The IOM/NAS group flatly rejected the ideas of a massive national quarantine program or mandatory blood testing to detect the AIDS virus. Its reasons for doing so, the panel made clear, were a mixture of pragmatism and concern for ethics and civil liberties. A quarantine would be of little help, the report said, since "those diagnosed with AIDS do not usually pose great danger" of spreading the epidemic further. Mandatory blood testing "would be impossible to justify now on either ethical or practical grounds," the panel concluded, arguing that those in high-risk groups—homosexuals, drug addicts or prostitutes—"are not likely to comply with a mandatory screening program." What is needed is the "voluntary cooperation of individuals who are at risk," the panel concluded. "Coercive measures will not solicit this cooperation and could prevent it."

Spending on AIDS-prevention education

## Leadership wanted: The president

Frank Press observed, than the nation suffered in World War I and the Vietnam War combined. There is little or no likelihood, in their view, that science can produce a cure for AIDS within that period; reliable prevention, in the form of a vaccine, is unlikely in the next five years as well.

As a result, the panel urged a massive national crusade to emphasize the necessity of "safe" sexual practices by all Americans, especially the young. The message of such an education campaign can be reduced to two gritty precepts. Random sex of any sort is dangerous. And all sex outside monogamous relationships with well-known partners should be accompanied